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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of storytelling as a pedagogic tool in Malaysian kindergartens. By listening to stories, the children learn to tell stories that involve communicating meaning. This is an effective learning technique, because stories and storytelling feed the children's imaginations, hone their listening skills, extend their vocabulary, and raise their level of proficiency in the language. This study involved 60 kindergartners from Malay and Chinese families living in a large metropolitan area. Respondents are categorized and analyzed by age, gender, race, and culture. It is concluded that the lack of a local Malaysian literature does not mean that children's literature is any less effective a tool for helping to teach Malaysian children foreign languages. It is argued that foreign literature should be used to the fullest extent possible, and used in tandem with local literature when available. (KFT)

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THE USE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN MALAYSIAN KINDERGARTENS

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INTRODUCTION

An Overview of the Language in Education in Malaysia

The national language of the country is Malay and English is an important second language. There are two types of schools in the country, namely national schools and national type schools, the latter comprising Chinese-medium schools and Tamil-medium schools. In national schools the medium of instruction is Malay, with English taught as a second language. Further, pupils can attend POL (Pupil's Own Language) classes, be it Tamil or Mandarin. In Chinese-medium schools, where the medium of instruction is Mandarin, Malay is taught as a second language and English as a third language. Likewise, in Tamil-medium schools, Tamil is the medium of instruction, while Malay is taught as the second language and English the third.

In order to have a headstart in school, children are sent to kindergartens as early as three years of age. In kindergarten the children are exposed to English and Malay. Some kindergartens also offer a third language, namely Mandarin, to prepare children who will be entering the national-type schools. Thus one finds that the majority of Malaysian children are bilingual and some non-Malay children are even trilingual and have in their linguistic repertoire languages such as Malay, English, Mandarin or Tamil.

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THE USE OF LITERATURE IN KINDERGARTENS

In Malaysian kindergartens story-telling is used as a pedagogical tool. By listening to stories children learn in turn to tell stories which involve communicating meaning. The argument for story telling as a medium for teaching language is that stories feed the child's imagination. In telling a story one is painting a word picture, that is, one is feeding the child's imagination using the medium of words. Therefore, the language one uses to tell a story should evoke strong images. Further, story-telling allows the child to enter the world of fantasy for the time the story is unfolding. One may argue that too much fantasy is negative, but on the other hand studies have shown that children can differentiate fantasy from reality. Hence it is safe for them in that time of story-telling to free their imagination and create a dream world in which they can explore their own judgements, anxieties and aspirations. In other words, the child can create a world that follows his own order and values.

It is possible to break down the benefits of story telling into two separate components, that is the benefits of listening to the story and the benefits of telling the story. Below are listed some of the benefits of listening to the story:

1. It feeds the child's imagination.
2. It hones the child's listening skills.
3. It extends the child's vocabulary.
4. It raises the child's level of proficiency in the language.

Further M. David and Y.C. Kow in an article entitled 'Teacher attitude to Literature Teaching' point out that through story telling the student can be exposed to:

5. Different cultures.

6. The English language.

7. A wide variety of writing styles.

8. Good moral values.

(Paper presented at the Universiti Pertanian Literature in English Seminar, June 7-9, 1993.)

The benefits the child gains from telling the story are:

1. He gets an opportunity to practise and use new words.

2. He practises his thinking and organisational skills.

3. He gets to use and practise the language.

4. He practises his speaking skills.

THE SELECTION OF LITERARY BOOKS

Children's literature should inculcate good values in terms of morals, character and discipline so that a child grows up to be a responsible member of society. In other words, children's books have to fulfil the prerequisite of being 'useful' in the areas listed below:

- Acquisition of literacy
- Expanding imagination
- Inculcating specific social attitudes
- Coping with problems
- Dealing with culture, racism etc.

Landsberg (1987:34) states that: "good books can do so much for children. At their best, they expand horizons and instil in children a sense of the wonderful complexity of life…no other pastime available to children is so conducive to empathy and the enlargement of human sympathies. No other pleasure can so richly furnish a child's mind with the symbols, patterns, depths, and possibilities of civilisation."

While Landsberg talks of the role of books in expanding the horizons of a child, Egoff (1987:355) argues that pedagogy should be kept out of children's writing. The role of childrens' literature is to bring joy and fantasy into a child's life.

This sentiment is echoed by Haviland (1973:273) who points out that children's stories should not be sermons or sociological pamphlets. In this study the stand is taken that children are creative beings who as Avery (1976:33) states:
"(Children) extract what they want from a book and no more. This stand is taken after a study of sixty respondents (see profile below).

SUBJECTS OF STUDY

A total of sixty respondents were selected for this study. All the respondents were from middle income families and were enrolled in various kindergartens in an urban area. Both male and female respondents were studied to determine if gender played a role in the selection of a story. Further factors such as mother tongue and age were also taken into consideration. Respondents ranging from four to six years of age were selected from Malay and Chinese families to determine the influence of culture and the mother tongue on the children's choice of their favourite story.

Of the sixty respondents twenty-eight were Chinese and thirty-two were Malay. The break down in terms of sex was twenty-five females and thirty-five males, distributed in the following manner according to age, fourteen aged four, twenty-four aged five and twenty-two aged six.

Table 1 shows the profile of the respondents while table 2 shows the breakdown according to gender and ethnic groups.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Age	Sex	Race	No. of Respondents
4	M	C	2
4	F	C	4
4	M	ML	3
4	F	ML	5
5	M	C	8
5	C	C	4
5	M	ML	8
5	F	ML	4
6	M	C	9
6	F	C	1
6	M	ML	5
6	F	ML	7

Table 2: Breakdown According to Gender and Ethnic Groups

	Age	Sex		Race	
		M	F	C	ML
No. of Respondents	4	5	9	6	8
	5	16	8	12	12
	6	14	8	10	12
Total		35	25	28	32

Key: M - MALE F - FEMALE C - CHINESE ML - MALAY

An Overview of the Stories Told by Respondents

In total a sample of forty-five stories was collected. The stories respondents chose to tell ranged from the conventional fairy tales, for example, 'Cinderella', to contemporary cartoon series, for example, 'Doraemon'. The following is a breakdown of samples collected from the various age groups:

- Age 4 - nine stories
- Age 5 - eighteen stories
- Age 6 - eighteen stories

A tabulation of stories told by the respondents based on age is provided.

A TABULATION OF STORIES TOLD BY RESPONDENTS BASED ON AGE

Respondents aged 4

Group	Gender	Race	Story
4	M	C	Power Rangers
5	F	C	Cartoon Story
9	F	C	Cinderella
15	M	ML	Jack and the Beanstalk
15	F	ML	Chicken Superfry
16	F	ML	Cinderella, Snow White
17	F	ML	Cinderella
18	F	ML	Snow White

Respondents aged 5

Group	Gender	Race	Story
6	M	C	Snow White, The Three Little Pigs
8	M	C	Goldilocks, The Tiger and the Rabbit
10	M	C	Power Rangers
11	F	C	Snow White
12	F	C	Robinson Crusoe
14	M	C	The Bird and the Ant
19	M/F	ML	101 Dalmatians, Cinderella
20	F	ML	Goldilocks, Robinson Crusoe
21	M	ML	Maxi Max, Batman
22	M/F	ML	Sinbad, Cinderella
23	F/M	ML	Cinderella, Dumbo Drop
24	M	ML	Ultraman

Respondents aged 6

Group	Gender	Race	Story
1	M	C	Doraemon
2	M	C	Ghost Story, Top Cat
3	M	C	Toy Story
7	M/F	C	The Tiger and the Snake, The Thirsty Crow
13	M	C	Power Rangers, Goldilocks
25	F	ML	The Cat and The Mouse, Cinderella
26	F/M	ML	The Thirsty Crow, Spiderman
27	F/M	ML	The Thirsty Crow
28	F	ML	Cinderella, The Three Goats
29	M	ML	Sonic
30	M/F	ML	Batman, Cinderella

A TABULATION OF STORIES TOLD BY RESPONDENTS BASED ON GENDER AND RACE

Stories Told By Male Respondents			
Male Chinese Respondents		Male Malay Respondents	
Group	Story	Group	Story
1	Doraemon	15	Jack and the Beanstalk
2	Ghost Story	19	101 Dalmatians
2	Top Cat	21	Maxi Max
3	Toy Story	21	Batman
4	Power Rangers	22	Sinbad
6	Snow White, The Three Little Pigs	23	Dumbo Drop
7	The Tiger and The Snake	24	Ultraman
8	Goldilocks, The Tiger and The Rabbit	26	Spiderman
10	Power Rangers	27	The Thirsty Crow
13	Power Rangers, Goldilocks	29	Sonic
14	The Bird and The Ant	30	Batman

Stories Told By Female Respondents			
Female Chinese Respondents		Female Malay Respondents	
Group	Story	Group	Story
5	Cartoon Story	15	Chicken Superfry
7	Cinderella	16	Cinderella
9	Snow White	16	Snow White
11	Robinson Crusoe	17	Cinderella
12	The Thirsty Crow	18	Snow White
		19	Cinderella
		20	Goldilocks
		22	Cinderella
		23	Cinderella
		25	The Cat and the Mouse
		25	Cinderella
		26	The Thirsty Crow
		27	The Thirsty Crow
		28	Cinderella
		28	The Three Goats
		30	Cinderella

The Gender Factor in Story Telling

The findings in this study show that there is a clear gender distinction in the stories the respondents chose to tell. The female respondents appeared to treasure romantic fairy tales like Cinderella and Snow White. On the other hand, among the male respondents, there appeared to be a preference for cartoon movies shown over television, for example, 'Power Rangers' and 'Batman'. Among the male Chinese respondents, three chose to talk about 'Power Rangers', one talked about 'Doraemon' and one talked about 'Toy Story'. Among the male Malay respondents, two chose to talk about 'Batman', while others chose to talk about 'Ultraman', 'Spiderman', 'Top Cat', 'Sonic' and 'Dumbo Drop'. This clearly points to the difference inherent among male and female children in the area of story preference. Girls clearly displayed their inherent

romantic nature in their preference for romantic fairy tales in which the Prince marries the poor heroine. Boys due to their heroic nature had no time for romance and preferred action-packed stories where the hero triumphed over evil.

The boys' preference was for visual stories in the form of videotapes which they could watch and not just read. Girls on the other hand treasured fairy tales told or read to them by their parents or teachers. Perhaps girls being the more imaginative of the two genders prefer to build castles in their own imagination, while boys being the more aggressive in nature, prefer stories that can feed their hunger for adventure.

This study points to the fact that in the selection of children's literature in Malaysian kindergartens should take into consideration the gender preference. The 'canon' of literature should cater to the needs of both boys and girls.

CULTURE

Cohen (1988:31) states that;

"Writers have become aware that, for the child, a book is a source of satisfaction that derives from identification and participation, and an expansion of his own experience. They provide him with an opportunity for catharsis, self-knowledge, and broadening with his psychic experience. The process of reading, identification, participation and relating brings the reader into the reality of the book in dynamic fashion."

If one takes Cohen's stand then the use of imported children's literature in Malaysian classrooms poses a major problem. How can a Malaysian child identify with a protagonist who sports blond hair and blue eyes?

In this study the stand is taken that children are creative beings who will draw what they require from a story. This stand is taken after having analysed the stories told by pre-school Malaysian children. Analysis of one story told by a five year-old Malay girl shows that two category of words can be identified. The two categories are shown below:

Words related to foreign culture	Words related to fantasy
Castle	Monsters
Carriage	Magic wand
Footman	Fairy godmother
Coachman	
Gown	

Analysis of the words related to fantasy show that these words may not be foreign to Malaysian children only. They may also prove to be difficult for other children as well because these words may not be in the list of common vocabulary of many children. Analysis also shows that Malaysian children are capable of adapting a story that is foreign to them. For example, in one story told by a female respondent Cinderella takes a shower and she goes to a hotel to dance. The conclusion may be drawn that children can handle foreign literature, further they can draw what they are ready for and what they need from these stories.

Hence the stand taken by Jacqueline Rose(1984) who argues that children's books construct children, both as characters and as readers, as without sexuality, innocent and denied politics, either a politics between themselves or within wider society. As such

they are seen as being with a privileged perception, untainted by culture. This is in line also with Avery's argument that children will extract only what they want from a book, no more, no less.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion may be drawn that while there exists a lack of local literature written by local writers, foreign literature must be exploited and used to its fullest. The vast resource of imported literature can be used in tandem with local literature. Children are creative beings who can overcome barriers be it of a cultural or of a linguistic nature. Children will draw what they require from literature, no more no less. Having said that, a caveat should be included. Teachers should necessarily be able to answer the children's queries on things and concepts that are foreign to them if the need arises.

Children's stories allows children to free their imagination and create a dream world in which they can explore their own judgments, anxieties and aspirations. In other words, the child can create a world that follows their own orders and values.

I would like to close by quoting Charlotte Huck(1976:4) who states:

"Good writing or effective use of language…will help the reader to experience the delight of beauty, wonder, and humor…he will be challenged to dream dreams, to ponder, and to ask questions to himself."

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